Tolerating Intolerance: Resisting the urge to Silence Student Opinion in the Writing Classroom " by Sarah Rider

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*Tolerating Intolerance...* is a thought provoking article that questions the ethical and moral responsibility a writing teacher shares with his/her students in the classroom when he/she is posed with a presentation that can be controversial and hurtful to others. In a situation like Williams, should the teacher silence William and thwart his freedom of expression or should the teacher allow her other students to be the judges is the dilemma. William, a white supremist who proudly displays the tattoo, "White Pride," seeks to present his ethnographic research study on "Odinism," a Pre Christian religion that is looked upon as a white supremacy group these days. William's first section of the presentation that focused on the gods and goddesses and ethnic foods of the religion did not pose any problems, but the second section where he talked about different artifacts posed serious threat to other students in Ms. Rider's class because of the rhetoric. William choose to present the following to share what he believed in life:

1. How the taxes imposed on white people deprive the white people limit the number of children they can have,

2. How the taxes that white people pay the government are used to support non-white,

3. The call to preserve the white race by pleading white people to marry within their race,

4. The call to resist miscegenation/interracial marriages in order to keep the white race pure without blemish

The teacher taught this writing class the workshop style where her students edit each others papers by offering specific comments and suggestions for improvement. Steve picked up Williams paper to edit, but Steve did not suggest any additions or deletions to Williams paper except for more information on the Odinism religion. Ms. Rider was skeptical and worried about Steve's peer response because of the racism component in the paper. However, Steve did not seem to be perturbed with William's thoughts because the artifacts were not furnished along with William's paper. The teacher was obliged to let Steve read the artifacts. Later, the teacher worried about Teresa, a white woman marries to a Mexican, and they had racially mixed children. William's paper was an direct attack to students like Teresa because William advocated for a pure white race and he hated mixed races.

Ms. Rider began musing about the repercussions of silencing a smart student just because he wrote about race. She further wondered if she should tell William about the different connotations of his rhetoric in his drafts, especially the with artifacts. The teacher was doing disservice to students like William if she silenced him. On the other hand, she did not want other students to think that she was supporting William's views. Since she was a staunch supporter of critical thinking, she let the class decide what to do with students like William.

On the day of the presentation, William's views about race, culture, ethnicity were thoroughly dissected for clarity and authenticity of expression. The students led a critical discussion about these labels people choose to use interchangeably. The teacher and William were happy at the end product.

William's presentation was considerably revised based on the feed back he got from his peers during the class discussion. He also realized that peer response is crucial in improving upon the drafts and the views expressed. The participating teacher also realized that she should not silence students who write about controversial and hurtful topics such as race, culture, ethnicity, misogyny, gun control etc. By silencing such students, we will be silencing the other students critical thinking abilities that are vital to any healthy debate in our classrooms.

Teachers should not rely on materials and students that please them, instead welcome controversial discussions that allow students formulate their own ideas and freely express them in the classroom because "It is only through sustained and respectful contact between people who do not think alike that meaningful conversations can be initiated and continued" (Rider 35).

Hence, diverse opinions should be valued in our classrooms.